



Big Bird in the Presidential Debate: Mitt Romney advocates cutting funding for Sesame Street, PBS

by THE WASHINGTON POST

OCT. 4, 2012

The Fix's Sean Sullivan reported early on the unexpected mention of Big Bird in the first presidential debate:

Sesame Street character Big Bird's name came up at Wednesday night's first presidential debate between President Obama and Mitt Romney.

As Romney noted what entities he would stop funding, he mentioned the president's health care law, then added that he would also stop a subsidy to PBS.

He said to moderator Jim Lehrer, who works for PBS: "I'm sorry, Jim. I'm going to stop the subsidy to PBS. I'm going to stop other things. I like PBS. I love Big Bird. I actually like you, too. But I'm not going to keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for it."

The AP delved into the social media reaction:

As Republican Mitt Romney pledged to cut funding to PBS — adding, "I like PBS, I love Big Bird" — commenters on Twitter leaped to the defense of their favorite "Sesame Street" characters. Big Bird was a major Twitter trend throughout the night, while Oscar the Grouch and Bert and Ernie also featured. Twitter said that shortly after Romney's remarks, users were posting 17,000 tweets per minute mentioning Big Bird. A spoof Twitter account, @firedbigbird, quickly won thousands of followers, while others shared a jokey, doctored photo showing the character posing with a cardboard sign pleading for work.

Why the proposed cuts to public television? Romney's comment came during a segment concerning what to do about the federal deficit. The remarks below came immediately before he said PBS and Big Bird would not pass his test as critical enough to "[borrow] money from China to pay for it."

ROMNEY: Good. I'm glad you raised that, and it's a -- it's a critical issue. I think it's not just an economic issue, I think it's a moral issue. I think it's, frankly, not moral for my generation to keep spending massively more than we take in, knowing those burdens are going to be passed on to the next generation and they're going to be paying the interest and the principal all their lives.

And the amount of debt we're adding, at a trillion a year, is simply not moral.

So how do we deal with it? Well, mathematically, there are three ways that you can cut a deficit. One, of course, is to raise taxes. Number two is to cut spending. And number is to grow the economy, because if more people work in a growing economy, they're paying taxes, and you can get the job done that way.

The presidents would ... prefer raising taxes. I understand. The problem with raising taxes is that it slows down the rate of growth. And you could never quite get the job done. I want to lower spending and encourage economic growth at the same time.

What things would I cut from spending? Well, first of all, I will eliminate all programs by this test, if they don't pass it: Is the program so critical it's worth borrowing money from China to pay for it? And if not, I'll get rid of it.

For The Washington Post's Dan Zak, the moment was a blip of relatability in a stream of wonkish banter:

For any informed citizen with a balanced-to-gluttonous media diet, this first economy-focused debate at the University of Denver played like a highlight reel of this eternal, infernal campaign: Percentages were repeated, deficits were re-tabulated and “trillions” were tossed around.

The utter wonkiness made for brain-bruising television. So for these 90 minutes, the unwonks of the world had to divine answers from vibe and optics. Former governor Romney was generally fluid and poised in his speech, while President Obama halted and hurdled his way through his sentences, often casting his eyes down during his opponent’s time, occasionally breaking into a smug-seeming smile.

Much of America tunes in to see who whiffs or blunders, to take shots of tequila (“Let me be clear”? Drink!), to parse the performances into byte-size visuals or sounds, to pounce on Thursday’s meme (which will be Big Bird, to whom Romney paid lip service when talking about cutting PBS funding). We watch to watch our other screens: Our Twitter feeds and their cascades of wryness were more entertaining than the candidates’ talk of deductions and exemptions.

The Fix’s Aaron Blake singled out Big Bird as an example of a near-stumble for Romney in his column this morning, titled ‘Six Reasons Mitt Romney won the debate:’

6. Romney avoided a stumble: Romney’s campaign has been colored by the occasional gaffe which shows the candidate to be out of touch or just plain awkward. There were a couple iffy moments on that count (Big Bird, anyone?), but the GOP nominee’s performance was largely gaffe-free. Without a “47 percent” or “I’m not concerned about the very poor” moment, Romney allowed for the post-debate analysis to focus on other things, which is what he needs.

The jab at the Sesame Street mainstay got him on to the Fix’s Winners and Losers list – in the minus column.

Big Bird: Mitt Romney may love the big yellow bird but he told America he would get rid of funding for PBS if he was president. Whither Elmo?

Read more on the presidential debate at PostPolitics:

Mitt Romney goes on the offensive

Analysis: Romney finds his voice on economy

Factchecking the first presidential debate of 2012

"Big Bird in the Presidential Debate: Mitt Romney advocates cutting funding for Sesame Street, PBS." *Washington Post* 04 Oct 2012, Politics. Web. 6 Oct. 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/decision2012/big-bird-in-the-presidential-debate-mitt-romney-advocates-cutting-funding-for-sesame-street-pbs/2012/10/04/f7f280ba-0e1f-11e2-bb5e-492c0d30bff6_story.html>.

1. What is the author’s purpose?
2. Who is the intended audience?
3. What is the article’s main idea?

Romney's Threat to Big Bird Sows Confusion Abroad, and Feeds It at Home

by ROBERT MACKEY

OCT. 5, 2012

Mitt Romney's promise, during Wednesday debate, to cut into America's debt by ending the federal subsidy for public broadcasting generated an Internet backlash, and at least one popular new Twitter account, largely because the former management consultant appeared to suggest that the beloved "Sesame Street" character Big Bird was surplus to requirements.

Mr. Romney's decision to run against Big Bird gladdened American conservatives, who have long complained of a liberal bias on public television and radio channels, but puzzled many viewers abroad, where local versions of the educational program are popular and well respected. In France, Le Monde reported that the slight against *le Gros Oiseau* threatened to spiral into "l'affaire Big Bird," after President Obama — experiencing a certain *esprit d'escalier* — came up, a day late, with the retort: "Thank goodness somebody is finally getting tough on Big Bird. It's about time. We didn't know that Big Bird was driving the federal deficit."

The German magazine Der Spiegel explained to readers that Mr. Romney's threat to the character that viewers of "Sesamstrasse" know as Bibo generated a *Twitter-Sturm* during the debate that reached maximum intensity in just 20 minutes.

In a useful roundup of the comic images of an unemployed Big Bird circulating on social networks, the Brazilian newspaper O Globo reported, somewhat inaccurately, that Mr. Romney had tried to soften the blow by first telling viewers, "I love Garibaldi," which is the name the character goes by in "Vila Sésamo."

At least some of the confusion among viewers watching the debate from outside the United States centered on the question of how Mr. Romney expected to get votes by pledging to eliminate state support for televised educational programming, and news, which is taken for granted in much of the developed world.

As Joshua Keating explained in a post for Foreign Policy, scholars at New York University reported last year that Americans spend far less per capita on public broadcasting than a representative sample of 13 other nations, including France, Britain, Germany, Japan, Australia and Canada.

Even factoring in money provided by states and local governments, Americans pay less than \$4 a year for the television and radio programming they get from PBS and NPR. Canadians and Australians pay about 8 times more per capita, the French and Japanese 14 times more, Britons 24 times more and Germans 41 times more.

In a statement decrying Mr. Romney's comments, PBS noted, "The federal investment in public broadcasting," about \$500 million a year, "equals about one one-hundredth of one percent of the federal budget."

In the context of the debate, though, what is probably more important than the fact that Americans actually pay a relatively small amount of money for public broadcasting is evidence that they are convinced that they are paying a lot more.

As Politico reported, "Most Americans think public broadcasting receives a much larger share of the federal budget than it actually does," according to a poll conducted for CNN last year. The results of that survey, which asked respondents to estimate what share of the federal budget was spent on certain programs, found that just 27 percent of Americans knew that the money for PBS and NPR was less than 1 percent of government spending. Remarkably, 40 percent guessed that the share was between 1 and 5

percent and 30 percent said it was in excess of 5 percent — including 7 percent who said that more than half of the federal budget was spent on television and radio broadcasts.

Asked if the spending on PBS and NPR should change, 53 percent called for it to be increased or stay the same, while just 16 percent said it should be eliminated entirely.

It might seem strange for anyone who knows that the federal government spends so little on PBS to begin a discussion of necessary cuts there, but perhaps Mr. Romney has calculated that the undecided voters he is chasing might be among the three-quarters of the American population that thinks the subsidy is far larger than it is.

A spokeswoman for PBS, Anne Bentley, told USA Today that the Congressional subsidy does not go to PBS or NPR, but to local stations around the United States that pay fees in exchange for broadcast rights to their programs, which are produced with donations and revenue from other sources. Ms. Bentley added that Congressional support accounts for up to 50 percent of the operating budgets for some local stations in rural areas. “They’re really in jeopardy of going dark if they don’t receive funding,” Ms. Bentley said.

The producers of “Sesame Street” offered a comic tweet in the voice of Big Bird the morning after the debate, and a statement explaining that while they are “a nonpartisan, nonprofit, educational organization,” they are also “dependent on PBS to distribute our commercial-free educational programming to all children in the United States.”

Without support from the public, educational programming would be interrupted by commercials and need to take the concerns of advertisers for higher ratings into account.

As Alyssa Rosenberg noted on the liberal Web site Think Progress, Mr. Romney has been talking about Big Bird on the campaign trail. In an exchange with a voter concerned about the federal debt caught on camera by CNN in Iowa last December, he said: “I’m going to see PBS is going to have to have advertisement. We’re not going to kill Big Bird, but Big Bird’s going to have advertisements.”

Mackey, Robert. "Romney's Threat to Big Bird Sows Confusion Abroad, and Feeds It at Home." *The Lede*. The New York Times, 05 Oct 2012. Web. Web. 6 Oct. 2012. <<http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/romneys-attack-on-big-bird-sows-confusion-abroad-and-feeds-it-at-home/>>.

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 npr.org

Big Bird Makes A Campaign Appearance

by Padmananda Rama

Oct. 5, 2012

For those concerned that Americans weren't paying close enough attention to the presidential election, a tall, fluffy, yellow bird helped change that this week.

Two days after the presidential debate in which Mitt Romney brought up the *Sesame Street* character in a reference to federal funding for PBS, the "Save Big Bird" debate continued.

"I'm going to stop the subsidy to PBS. I'm going to stop other things," Romney said, while debating President Obama Wednesday night. "I like PBS. I love Big Bird. I actually like you too. But I'm not going to — I'm not going to keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for it. "

Twitter says that during the debate, Big Bird was mentioned in [17,000 tweets per minute](#).

Federal funding for public television — and public radio — comes via the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a nonprofit, private organization chartered by Congress. About 72 percent of the CPB funding goes directly to local TV and radio stations that distribute programs, such as *Sesame Street*.

On CNN's "*Piers Morgan Tonight*" Thursday, former Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum said he's voted to "kill Big Bird in the past," adding:

"I have a record there that I have to disclose. That doesn't mean I don't like Big Bird. You can kill things and still like them, maybe to eat them, I don't know. ... Can we go back on that one?"

At a rally in Virginia Friday, Obama chided Romney: "For all you moms and kids out there, don't worry — someone is finally getting tough on Big Bird. Rounding him up. Elmo has got to watch out, too."

A Facebook page is calling for a "[Million Muppet March](#)" Nov. 3 on the National Mall.

Actor George Takei, of *Star Trek* fame, posted an [image](#) to his Facebook account, referencing a [popular Tumblr blog](#) from earlier this year about Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, with the caption: "Confirmed. I got the bird. We will move him to a safe house in the morning."

It's all somewhat absurd, but PBS, which distributes *Sesame Street*, released a [statement](#) saying:

"The federal investment in public broadcasting equals about one one-hundredth of one percent of the federal budget. Elimination of funding would have virtually no impact on the nation's debt. Yet the loss to the American public would be devastating."

CPB has long been a source of debate on Capitol Hill. Congressional Republicans have targeted public media funding in their budget proposals. CPB also was among the proposed cuts under a 2010 deficit-cutting plan offered by leaders of the bipartisan Bowles-Simpson commission.

Rama, Padmananda. "Big Bird Makes A Campaign Appearance." *It's All Politics*. NPR, 05 Oct 2012. Web. Web. 6 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/itsallpolitics/2012/10/05/162366056/big-bird-makes-a-campaign-appearance>>.

1. What is the author's purpose?
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Word process a paragraph that states your point of view about a limited topic discussed in all three articles prior to Friday. Support your opinion by referencing one or more of the articles or citing another source. If you use a source that you have found through your own research, include the bibliographic citation for it. For help with citing, go to Citation Machine at <http://citationmachine.net/index2.php?reqstyleid=0&stylebox=1>.

Friday's Group Discussion Questions:

1. How do the three articles differ?
2. How are the three articles similar?
3. What facts are cited in the articles?
4. What statements seem biased?
5. Which article is most reliable? Why?